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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000083

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SUBJECT: SOMALI MIGRANTS ENTER OMAN THROUGH OPEN BORDER  
WITH YEMEN

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo, reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Emboffs recently visited sections of Oman's border with Yemen, observing that much of the border lacks fencing and generally is open to illegal traffic. Somali immigrants continue to enter Oman along well-traveled smuggling routes, though not in large numbers. Many of the Somalis allegedly enter or transit Oman in search of employment, and contacts say their presence is having a negative effect on local security. End summary.

¶2. (C) During the week of January 15, poloff and the Embassy's Defense Attache (DATT) conducted an unofficial tour of the Oman-Yemen border between the ports of entry (POE) at Sarfayt, located on Oman's coast, and al-Mazyunah, approximately 140 kilometers inland. Emboffs carried out the inspection to support a project of the Department's Export Control and Related Border Security Assistance (EXBS) program, which will provide the Royal Oman Police (ROP) with ground sensor equipment to monitor cross-border traffic and help secure Oman's southeastern border. (Note: Post and EXBS intend to hand over the equipment during an official ceremony in Muscat in February. The equipment, which includes sensors that detect heat, vibration, motion and magnetic fields, forms one component of a broad package of assistance to help Oman implement effective export control systems and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and conventional weapons. End note.)

¶3. (C) In the course of discussions with ROP interlocutors in Salalah and at the POEs, a mid-ranking police officer based in Salalah informed emboffs that illegal migrants from Somalia continue to enter Oman regularly. The officer told emboffs that since the last quarter of 2006, the ROP has been assisting in the deportation of approximately 150 Somalis per month as part of an ongoing operation. He stated that on January 14, for example, the ROP transferred 74 Somalis from Arzaat prison near Salalah, where the ROP maintains a detention center for illegal immigrants, into the custody of Yemeni authorities. The officer added, however, that many of the Somalis are repeat offenders, which makes it difficult to assess the actual number of Somalis trying to enter Oman. The source said that many of the deportees candidly tell him that they are not detained by Yemeni authorities after their return to Yemen, and therefore attempt to reenter Oman as early as two days after their deportation.

¶4. (C) The officer told emboffs that he has been able to determine two of the main routes for entry into Oman through his conversations with Somali detainees. One is by sea, in which Somalis travel by boat from Yemen to the secluded beaches near the Omani towns of Dhalqut and Rakhyut. The other is by land, moving from the Yemeni town of al-Gaydah up through the relatively flat and open terrain near the Omani town of al-Mazyunah. The source continued that once the

Somalis enter Oman, they use phone numbers passed through a network of family and friends in Somalia to contact Omani citizens, who drive them to onward destinations inside Oman and elsewhere in the Gulf region.

15. (C) The officer added that while units from the ROP and army collaborate to secure the border area, large stretches of the border are wide open and difficult to patrol. The border area north of the ROP-manned POE at Sarfayt is mountainous with deep wadis (valleys), and largely inaccessible by vehicle. He estimated that there are only five kilometers of fencing along the approximately 140-kilometer border between Sarfayt and the POE at al-Mazyunah. Emboffs confirmed that at present there is no fencing or other barrier to stop cross-border traffic along vast stretches of territory south of al-Mazyunah. Emboffs saw evidence of frequent vehicular traffic across the desert between Oman and Yemen within five kilometers of the POE at al-Mazyunah, particularly through wadis that offer substantial cover from ground-based observation. The ROP officer stated that most Somalis enter Oman under the cover of darkness, which, combined with the terrain, makes it difficult to interdict them.

16. (C) The same source told emboffs that most of the Somalis who enter Oman are very poor. He further stated that many enter Oman in bad physical condition; some of the Somalis taken into custody are without shoes. The source described one detainee who had crossed the mountainous and desert terrain of the border region with a broken leg, using homemade crutches. ROP contacts at Salalah's Arzaat Prison informed poloff on a previous trip to the region that many of the Somalis who enter Oman have UN refugee status in Yemen. They described the Somalis as primarily economic migrants

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looking for work in Oman, or transiting the country for employment in the UAE. All of emboff's ROP interlocutors said that the influx of impoverished Somalis is having a negative effect on the region's economy and security. The ROP officer who spoke to emboffs on their trip to the border claimed that some are involved in petty theft, likely stealing from local households to help meet their basic needs, and are denuding the area's frankincense trees in order to harvest and sell the trees' sap. While he acknowledged that some Somalis have had violent encounters with police and army units, the officer said that the vast majority appear to be unarmed and non-violent.

17. (C) The ROP officer added that the paths Somalis use to enter Oman follow well-known smuggling routes for the transporting of guns and cars between Yemen, Oman and the UAE. The officer told emboffs that he is aware of at least three instances during the past year in which the ROP has interdicted Toyota Land Cruisers loaded with handguns and other weapons of Russian and Chinese origin, entering Oman from Yemen near al-Mazyunha. He and his colleagues believe that many more such vehicles pass police and army checkpoints undeterred, and that most of the smugglers head toward lucrative markets in the UAE via Oman's section of the Empty Quarter and the city of Ibri. While the source did not make a direct connection between Somali immigrants and the gun trade, he said that the combination of weapons, smugglers, and poor and desperate people make the border region around al-Mazyunha a dangerous and volatile area.

18. (C) Comment: Based on emboffs' observations and the comments of ROP interlocutors, much of Oman's border with Yemen is either unpatrolled or unprotected, and people and goods appear to move freely across it. Contacts anticipate that the instability in Somalia likely will lead to an increase in the number of Somalis making their way overland or by sea to Oman. The USG offer of ground sensors through EXBS should help Oman strengthen its border security in this area, though significant gaps likely will remain. End comment.

